

Poplar Island expansion sees pushback from neighboring island owners

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• FILE PHOTO BY JOSH BOLLINGER

Pictured above in this 2014 file photo is a wetland built as part of a project to rebuild Poplar Island out of material dredged from the Port of Baltimore. Tides flow into the wetland, which was built with channels to ensure water flow in and out of the Bay.

EASTON — The Maryland Board of Public Works approved a wetlands permit to extend Paul S. Sarbanes Ecosystem Restoration Project at Poplar Island, the state's environmental restoration project that is working toward restoring the eroded island to its size as mapped in the 1840s.

But Phase III, which had its permits approved during the board's Wednesday, Feb. 24, meeting, will extend the Talbot County island beyond its 1847 area, and the measure didn't pass without some pushback from the owner of Poplar Island's neighbor, Jefferson Island.

When mapped in 1847, Poplar Island, just northwest of Tilghman Island, was more than 1,100 acres. But by the 1990s, erosion reduced it to only 5 acres, which led to a federal and state collaboration to restore Poplar Island using dredged materials from the shipping channel that leads to the Port of Baltimore.

The first and second phases of Poplar Island have brought it back to its historic, 1847-mapped size. The third phase, which is scheduled to take 30 years of work, will extend the island by more than 500 acres of habitat.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposed to dredge 28 million cubic yards of material from the Port of Baltimore shipping channel for phase three — for 259 acres of upland habitat, 206 acres of tidal wetland and 110 acres of protected open water bay.

Jefferson Island was once part of Poplar Island, but it, along with neighboring Coaches Island, split due to weather-related erosion. It was once used as a hunting retreat for the Jefferson Island Club before the club relocated after a 1946 fire.

Part owner of the island, Paul Zelinski, who also owns Lowes Wharf Marina Inn, was in front of the Board of Public Works on Wednesday with an attorney, Tim Henderson, representing the members of Jefferson Island LLC.

Henderson said Zelinski and partners bought Jefferson Island in 2001, when they were aware of the first and second phases, but the third phase — an extension of the island's original 1847-mapped footprint — wasn't planned.

"It's a form of island creation, rather than island restoration," Henderson said.

He said that the board doesn't have the authority to approve island creation, although an opinion from the state attorney general's office found that the board was operating within legal boundaries, should it approve the wetlands license.

Henderson also said a required analysis that's aimed to consider other options for construction was deficient.

However, Maryland State Treasurer Nancy Kopp said a study was done that determined the dredge spoils couldn't be used elsewhere around Poplar Island because the sediment in other areas besides the planned third phase can't support the weight of the dredged materials.

Henderson and Zelinski also cited issues with significant noise that will occur from construction during the project's 30-year life, and a view of the Eastern Bay from Jefferson Island that will be blocked by the Poplar Island's third phase. Henderson said it will also effect the view from Lowes Wharf.

Henderson said there wasn't mitigation offered to Jefferson Island LLC for any of the issues they brought forward.

"If the board proceeds and issues the license, we are prepared, both Jefferson Island LLC and the marina (Lowes Wharf Marina Inn) will appeal the issue of the permit and we'll also ... explore all legal avenues for compensation," Henderson said.

The Board of Public Works unanimously approved the wetlands license, which finished the permitting process for the third phase. According to a spokesman for the Army Corps of Engineers, construction will start in mid-summer, after an amendment to the project cooperation agreement that adds the third phase onto the total project is signed with the state.

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